

PEASANTS ORGANIZATION AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

IN INDIA

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NEW DELHI



PAPER PRESENTED AT SEMINAR ON THE
ROLE OF RURAL ORGANIZATIONS IN
RURAL DEVELOPMENT, ASIAN CENTRE
FOR DEVELOPMENT ADMINISTRATION,
KUALA LUMPUR 20-28 JUNE, 1977.

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The experience of the past twenty-five years of India's development has shown that rural prosperity has not been widespread and the weaker sections have been deprived of the benefits of development. Vested interests already entrenched in the rural society and the rising new agricultural classes have managed to insulate the poor from reaping the fruits of economic growth. It has also become fairly obvious that the government has not been able to penetrate this barrier in spite of massive organizational and economic effort for rural uplift.

Therefore the argument is gaining acceptance that more even distribution of developmental benefits cannot occur unless the poor can organize themselves to bargain for a better deal. It is only this bargaining strength that can loosen the hold of the privileged classes and bring about drastic changes in the institutional arrangements.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the role and growth of rural organizations in India and to investigate their strength in becoming effective instruments of diffusing developmental benefits

throughout rural society. Government sponsored organizations as well as those sponsored by political parties or groups are subjects of this study. The main focus of attention is on the under-privileged sections like landless labour, sharecroppers, small and marginal farmers and their organizations. Organizations of landlords or richer farmers lobby are left out of discussion.

One part of paper deals with the general agrarian structure, its characteristics that impinge on the growth and role of rural organizations. The second part discusses the government sponsored organizations. The last part is concerned with organizations that have arisen out of the initiatives of political parties or groups.

I

National Policy for Rural Development

National policy for agricultural and rural development originated as a reaction to the official colonial policy of viewing agriculture in an insular and technological perspective alone. The insular view implied that agriculture was not related to the general problem of economic backwardness associated with colonial administration and consequently,

agricultural backwardness could be ameliorated without action to promote other sectors of the economy. On the other hand, the technological view implied that agricultural backwardness was due to technological inadequacies and the institutional framework was not so important. The agrarian policy emerged as a critique of these ideas and later attempted to reconcile these varying positions during the post-independence era.¹

Gandhi stressed the futility of one-sided efforts to improve agriculture and did not see a way out of this problem in Western industrialism and technological progress. He looked for a solution in the direction of regenerating Indian village communities through small-scale agriculture and cottage industries. This involved minimum use of machinery and maximum use of labour. However, Gandhi was unable to follow through his ideas coherently and systematically. On the one hand he was the most eloquent spokesman of peasant interests and considered the protection of the poor peasantry as the prime goal of the Congress but on the other hand, he was not prepared to strike at

1. P.C. Joshi, Pre-Independence Thinking on Agrarian Policy, Economic and Political Weekly, 11:8, February 25, 1967, pp.447-56.

landlordism which was the root cause of rural poverty and backwardness. The concept of trusteeship was propagated by him to safeguard the interest of the landlord and to humanize the relations between the rich and the poor. Consequently, he disapproved of the peasants organizing themselves to fight for reform in the land system.

Nehru in attempting to integrate the insular and technological views of agricultural backwardness, pleaded for a radical change in the land laws and transformation of the existing land tenure system. He also pleaded for coordinated development of industry. However, his agricultural approach got muted in the independence movement because Gandhi mobilized the rural poor on anti-British rather than anti-landlord perspective. Thus, the rural urge for initiating changes in the agrarian structure was relegated to chapters in Plans formulated by the socialist groups in the Congress while the movement went on to incorporate the landlords and peasants to fight the British. An image of basic harmony of interests was built up. This had implications on the growth and development of peasant organizations as we shall see later.

Independence released energies to work on agriculture strategies in a more coherent fashion. Policies towards rural development have gradually emerged over the last five year plans. At no period of time has there been a radical shift from what was happening before. More often than not, old programmes have been allowed to languish when new ones are taken up. Usually, there is multiplicity of policy objectives with operational strategies presenting sometimes confusing if not contradictory picture at a particular point of time.

Thus, the policy makers with three policy objectives viz., productivity, social justice and the creation of a self-sufficient village. In the beginning of the First Plan it was assumed that if the social impediments to agriculture production were removed, then output would increase which in turn, through measures of distributive justice will lead to greater prosperity in the rural areas. Within the scope of this goal, the ideal of village sufficiency was also injected which assumed that external influence on village life was harmful and the rural folk should have the capacity to maintain their autonomy.

II

Land Policy and the Agrarian Structure

Improving land relations was the foremost effort of transforming the agrarian structure. The two main and inter-related objectives of India's land policy as laid down in the first Five Year Plan and reiterated in the subsequent plans were:

- a) to remove agriculture and other impediments to increase agricultural production as arisen from the agrarian structure and to create conditions conducive to an agricultural economy with high levels of efficiency and productivity; and
- b) to eliminate the elements of exploitation and social injustice within the agrarian system so as to provide a sound basis for the evolution of a democratic society in the rural areas.

In the Fourth Plan the emphasis was renewed on all out support for the new strategy of production in agriculture by ensuring complete security for the tenant and the sharecropper and enabling him to participate effectively in the agricultural production programmes and by making concerted efforts towards enforcement of ceilings on land holdings.

Thus, policies in this regard were concerned with action on three fronts: (i) the abolition of intermediary tenures like zamindaris, jagirdaris and inams which covered more than 40% of the area of

the country; (ii) providing security of tenures to tenants and regulations of rents; and (iii) the imposition of ceiling on land holdings and the distribution of surplus land to the landless and uneconomic land holders.

It is in respect of the abolition of intermediary tenures that the success has almost been complete. It has brought more than 20 millions of tenants into direct relation with the state. It has also relieved the cultivators of several feudal dues and liberated them from anachronistic and repressive revenue administration. But this also had another significant consequence. Many of these zamindars and jagirdars were allowed to resume land for self-cultivation which no doubt led to the eviction of tenants to some extent but contributed to the active participation of erstwhile landlords into actual farming. Cultivated area also increased.

Other aspect of land policy have had uneven implementation. Tenants, by and large, still do not enjoy fixity of tenure. They are either tenants at will or subject to landlords right of resumption or enjoy temporary protection only. There has been leasing of land on a considerable scale even in areas

where intermediary tenures existed. The problems of relating to such leases have continued even after the abolition of intermediary tenures. Such tenancies are generally of an informal nature without any written document or record, which makes it difficult to arrive at a correct assessment of the extent of the tenancy problem. Control over leasing is so weak² that it can be called non-existent.

Another insecurity is due to right of the owner to resume land on the plea of self-cultivation. Self-cultivation is a crucial concept in determining fairness of claim but it has not been precisely defined. The result has been that land under personal cultivation can continue to be cultivated by sharecroppers, if necessary disguised as agricultural workers. Thus, as a Report of the Government of India points out "it is not surprising that passage of these laws brought a wave of evictions of tenants and resumption of land for so-called personal cultivation."³ The publicity of governments intentions has also led to large scale evictions which the Government has not been able to control; similar fate has fallen on ceiling laws and

2. Government of India, Agrarian Tension in India, Ministry of Home Affairs, Delhi, 1969, (Mimeo)

3. Ibid.

transfer of land have tended to defeat the aims of legislation for ceiling.

We can now identify the major characteristics of agrarian structure.

1. Though there has been some reduction in the unevenness of distribution, the overall picture has not changed in the size and distribution of land holdings. The average size of holdings in each class has remained more or less the same with the All India average changing from 2.5 to 2.6 to 2.2 hectares in the three time periods. Similarly, 50.7% of family holdings occupied only 5.6% of cultivated area in 1954-55. While 4.7% of family holdings occupy more than 36% of land. This basic picture of inequality has not changed over the years.
2. The inequalities in land holdings is further accerbated by the absolute number of agriculture workers and sharecroppers who constitute the bulk of the rural poor. According to the 1971 census the number of agricultural labourers in India is 47.48 million. The figure was 31.51 million in 1961 and 27.49 million in 1951. Agricultural workers constitute around 27% of the total worker population according to 1971 census. This percentage has also increased

from 17 in 1951 to 20 in 1961. The figure of sharecroppers is rather uncertain. Although the incidence varies from state to state, the system of share cropping is fairly widespread throughout the country. In most states the sharecroppers are not registered but according to an estimate the sharecroppers must be around 20 percent of the total number of cultivators.⁴ And the figure of the cultivators was 78.17 million in 1971, 99.52 million in 1961 and 59.3 million in 1951. Thus, the rural scene is marked by about 63.6 million agricultural workers and sharecroppers who are not only landless but also form the bulk of the rural poor.

3. The exploitative character of the agrarian situation is also heightened by the fact that richer landlords prefer to stay away in cities and get their lands tilled in variety of modes without entering into legal formalities with the actual cultivators.

4. Based on an estimate of D. Bandhopadya in a paper External Impediments to the Growth of Rural Poor in India in Organization of Peasants in Asia (Report of a Seminar) Bangkok, 1974.

Over 82% of the tenants have no fixity of tenure.⁵

Begar or bonded labour abound and the feudal character is carried on inspite of the changed environment. The agrarian scene in India has not undergone radical transformation inspite of the professed goals and priorities enunciated in the various Five Year Plans. The irony is that till lately bonded labour as a group was not even recognised and special policies to liberate them from the exploitative hold of the landlords have been articulated only recently.⁶ Various government programmes of rural uplift are sought to be implemented with in this socio-economic structure with different results.

III

Community Development and Panchayati Raj

Together with this effort of changing agrarian structure through land policy, another major effort to transform the villages came through the programme of Community Development and National Extension Service

5. About 82% of the total number of tenants, mainly in the states of Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Tamil Nadu, Bihar, Punjab, Haryana and West Bengal do not enjoy fixity of tenure. They are either tenants at will or subject to landlords right of resumption, or enjoy temporary protection only. (The Causes and Nature of Agrarian Tensions, Ministry of Home Affairs, Govt. of India, Research and Policy Division, August 1969).
6. In a recent Conference of Secretaries, the administrators were involved in enumerating the number of bonded labour in the states. No state had any statistics on rehabilitation or plan of action. See the editorial in Economic Times, October 28, 1976.

of Community Development and National Extension Service initiated in 1952. The planners, assumed that community development programme would 'secure increases in agricultural production beyond the targets envisaged in the plan' for they stated unmistakably in the Third Plan that the principal test to be met by the community development programme must be its practical effectiveness as an agricultural extension agency.⁷ The Government was expected to fulfil a two-fold role in the programme. On the one hand, it had to apply resources and technical help for the community to develop and on the other hand, to see that this aid is administered so as to generate a steady and independent growth in rural society.

An elaborate organization from the village upwards was established for this purpose. The basis on which these institutions were established was the expectation that "local self help village groups will mobilize their natural and human resources for local improvements of all kinds and all technical agencies of the government will aid them in this undertaking."⁸ The major assumption of this programme was that the villagers as groups will show initiative in formulating and developing programmes. Further, villages will work as

7. See also Report of Community Development Mission in India. U.N. Commission for Technical Assistance, Government of India 1959.

8. Ibid.

groups to further the ends of community development and government will assist these groups only to the extent required by them.

However, these schemes failed to evoke people's participation. Reliance on government increased which strengthened the top down process of planning.⁹ The programme was also not able to help the economically backward classes. Those who benefitted from the development programmes and improved their socio-economic conditions usually belonged to those sections of the village society who were better off than others.

One of the important reasons for this failure was the inability of the officials to contact the groups who were supposed to be the targets of the programme. Due to the status situation, the officials frequently came into contact with their traditional caste leaders or those belonging to the land owning class. These classes were also motivated in maintaining contact with the officials because their need for more government resources could be fulfilled only by them. Community development agencies were perceived as service and resource providing agencies. In turn, the officials found such contacts rewarding because many of the targets laid down by higher level authorities could only be met

9. Kuldeep Mathur, Rural Development Plans. Problems Demand Political Answers, Times of India March 4, 1976.

with the support of these leaders. For example, the target of voluntary labour could be more easily achieved if these groups provided support either by hiring labour and calling it contribution from themselves or by using 'bonded' labour and euphemistically listing it as voluntary. Thus, bargain of mutual benefit emerged with the collusion of the officials and the so-called community leaders. But this relationship effectively alienated the deprived rural poor from the aims and objectives of the Community Development programme.¹⁰

Panchayati Raj or the scheme of democratic decentralization was introduced from 1958 onwards primarily to meet with such failures of community development programmes. With its elective institutions, it aimed at providing popular support to rural development programmes of the government. A three-tier structure with Panchayat at village level, Panchayat Samiti at Block level and Zilla Parishad at District level was established. There was inter-locking membership with the entry point only at Panchayat level and members rising to district level through indirect elections. The official

10. Several studies have shown this. See in particular V.M. Sirsikar, Rural elite in a Developing Society, Orient Longmans, Delhi 1970; M.V. Mathur et.al Panchayati Raj in Rajasthan, Impex, Delhi 1966.

community development hierarchy was maintained and was expected to achieve community development aims and objectives through cooperation of the leadership thrown up by Panchayati Raj.

Instead of providing opportunities to the rural poor to organize themselves through Panchayati Raj, it helped to institutionalize the role of the traditional and land-owning leadership. With increased flow of funds and resources from the government being channelled through community development schemes and Panchayati Raj institutions, the entrenched leadership found it necessary to acquire hold of these institutions in order to maximize their own advantages. Existing advantages in rural life helped them to legitimize themselves through elections.

Thus, contrary to expectations, there was no major or radical shift in the character of leadership that emerged through Panchayati Raj institutions. There is very little evidence to show that the traditional factors of caste or property are no longer associated with power and leadership.

The local leadership forged links with state leadership which quickly realised that to gain rural votes, it was important to win over Panchayat Raj leaders. Panchayat Raj became "Vote Bank for political purposes. Similarly, cooperative leadership became a

source of power for local leadership because it provided medium of contact between the village and the government. Co-operatives also became part of local power struggles and it was not infrequent that the same group controlled both - the village Panchayat as well as the village cooperative.

A recent study concludes, "the hold of traditional leaders is complete. These leaders represent the propertied and the privileged groups in the village society."¹¹ The aims of the rural organizations that had been formed thus, got obviously distorted. Dominated by the privileged groups, the organizations set up forged links with higher echelons - official and non-official - so that narrow interests could be satisfied. Community development obviously became sectarian development for the dominant group.

Considering the character of village society, such a deviation was bound to be the result. There was homogeneous community in the village. Groups that existed were marked by conflicts. Thus, the interests of the agricultural labour were different from those of the tenants or share-croppers and many came into conflict with each other.

11. K.D . Gangrade, Emerging Patterns of Leadership, Rachna Publications, Delhi 1974.

The landowners and tenants are interested in keeping agricultural wages as low as possible, all land-owners are interested in raising their share of produce of the land and also to eject their tenants - the big landlords are invariably the village money-lenders who oppress all other classes in the village.

Rural organizations actually helped the richer classes to strengthen themselves. The elimination of zamindars had left the middle peasantry in power positions and with links with states or national level leadership. These comparatively richer farmers had found cause with the rural poor when the nationalist mobilization was taking place. But with independence they took advantage of its links to work for its self-interest. This meant a great reliance on the governmental funds and less concern about raising own resources. Recourse to any other action would have meant greater mobilization of the rural poor and identification with their interests. This could not be done. Thus, the rural poor were left out of developmental benefits and institutions created for them were captured by the entrenched classes to serve their interests .

IV

Cooperative and Rural Development

In another attempt to organize the rural poor to help themselves, village cooperatives were established. Various forms of cooperatives were in existence in India since the beginning of this century but their record had been that of "dismal failure".¹² The Five Year Plans in India gave them a new lease of life when the planners argued that the planned economic and social development in the countryside would take place as far as possible, through the means of cooperatives. The first Five Year Plan pointed out, "as the purpose of the Plan is to change the economy of the country from an individualistic to a socially regulated and cooperative based its success should be judged among other things, by the existence to which it is implemented through cooperative organization".¹³

Several models of cooperative societies emerged. First type of a model that emerged was that of service cooperative which helped its members through the supply of credit, agricultural inputs, storage facilities, marketing assistance etc. In practice, however, the cooperatives have mainly come to be associated with supply of rural credit and only lately agricultural inputs. It was assumed that cooperatives would be able to help the rural poor and

12. See in particular D. Thorner, Agricultural Cooperatives in India, Asia, Bombay 1964.

13. First Five Year Plan, p.164.

others who are unable to take credit to improve their farm practices or who are kept out of developmental benefits because of the dominance of the traditional leadership and land-owning classes. To a great extent, therefore, cooperative credit programmes were initiated to protect the weaker sections from the exploitation by the money lenders and also in the process help them through greater availability of credit to increase¹⁴ their agricultural production.

The result was that cooperative became credit disbursing agencies. The government provisions of funds were available once a society fulfilled minimum conditions. In such a situation, those persons who could manipulate rules and could clearly foresee the role of the cooperative for their own benefit took hold of existing cooperatives and established new ones. Thus, liberal financial support available from the Government built a particular image of a cooperative. For the dominant classes, it provided opportunity for easy credit and also for wielding political power. Both the opportunities were quickly seized by them.

No wonder, therefore, that the cooperatives did not appear anxious to undertake promotional activities and help the small farmer who needed their services. The result was

¹⁴. For authoritative surveys of rural credit see All India Rural Credit Survey, Reserve Bank of India, Bombay 1954; and Report of the All India Review Committee RBI, Bombay 1969.

that the cooperatives drifted away from the express purpose of helping the small farmer who needed their services and have gradually been grasped by those whose stranglehold it sought to loosen. Cooperative leadership became an independent source of village power because it provided medium of contact between the village and the government. Thus, like the village panchayat, a cooperative combined political as well as service functions. Consequently, the cooperative resources have been controlled by those who count in the local power struggles and the cooperatives have been as much part of the local factional struggles as the Panchayats. Not infrequently, the same faction controls both.¹⁵

Another model of cooperatives has been encouraged at the production level. At the end of June 1974 there were over 97,000 cooperative farming societies with a total membership of 0.27 million, commanding a total area of 0.53 million hectares. But more than 60% of these societies are not functioning properly. A number of societies have been formed by bigger farmers for their own benefit. The dominant group in such societies does not participate in the farming operations and the number of absentee members is large; work being entrusted to casual labourers engaged on a daily basis. Secondly, there are societies formed by small farmers

15. Gunnar Myrdal, Asian Drama, Penguin Books, London, 1968, pp.1335-36.

who have pooled their holdings in the cooperative. Such societies are usually homogenous in character. The majority of members in such societies are invariably engaged in farm operations and there are few absentees. The third category comprises societies formed on the lands that have been assigned to them or acquired for them. These are usually landless agricultural labourers.¹⁶

The government's policy has been to encourage cooperative farming societies of second and third categories. However, inspite of this policy bigger cultivators who are also village leaders have frequently been allowed to join cooperative farming societies. They do not pool all their resources but are able to direct the activities due to their position and influence.

Another problem concerns the extent of pooling of land. Inspite of the advice of the Advisory Board, partial pooling has been allowed by several states. The result has been divided loyalty. It is also true, however, that smaller cultivators do not want to pool all their land because then they have no land against which they can obtain loan from the money-lenders and even landlords for their urgent domestic needs like illness or weddings.¹⁷

16. Economic and Political Weekly, December 20, 1975, pp.1942-43.

17. Ibid.

V

The New Agricultural Strategy and the Green Revolution

The rural development policy during the fifties, as we have seen, was focused on providing such institutional support that could modernize the village community and make itself sufficient. It was assumed that the major difficulties with rural people was their backwardness and lethargy and once their attitudes were changed then everything else will follow. Rural organizations were encouraged in the hope of changing the minds and souls of the villagers and re-ordering the village community itself. Increasing number of land laws were passed so that the agrarian structure was transformed from an exploitative one to a system that could release the productive energies of rural people.

Thus land reform was complemented by Community Development and National Extension Service coupled with Panchayati Raj and Cooperatives in order to build infrastructure and introduce new techniques. However, in this period of national enthusiasm for the work being done in the rural areas, it was gradually becoming obvious that agricultural production at the end of the Second Plan was lagging behind. The Third Plan was starting on a considerable backlog of food production and trend towards increasing agricultural prices. Thus, the Third Plan was taking shape when it was not only being argued that

agriculture needed much greater investment but also that "the rural sector could no longer be considered a welfare or social reform problem but rather an alternative to industry¹⁸ as source of resources and growth.

Thus a new turn in agricultural development policy was marked by a Report of Ford Foundation experts who recommended a major shift in policy away from peoples focus of participation and involvement towards an emphasis on technological solutions to the problem of agricultural development within the framework of existing agrarian structure.¹⁹ The government accepted the recommendations of selecting a few areas for concentrated attention and Package Programme of Intensive Agricultural Development Projects was initiated in selected districts of the country around 1961-62. This approach received added strength with the introduction of HYV Seeds and new technological inputs. It was argued that the performance of the technology would be improved considerably if and only if applied to irrigated areas. Therefore, to maximize the benefits from technological advances, the Agricultural Ministry sought for certain concessions in the

18. J.W. Meller et. al. Developing Rural India Plan & Practice, Cornell University Press, N.Y. 1968, p. 83.

19. See Modernizing Indian Agriculture: Report on the Intensive Agriculture District Programme, 1960-68 Government of India, Delhi, 1969.

ideological goals that were focussed toward bringing greater
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 social justice in the rural sector.

To a great extent the new strategy signalled a considerable dilution of the earlier approach of increasing agricultural production by giving social incentives to the farmer through far-reaching institutional changes. The emphasis of the strategy was on measures for immediate increase in agricultural production rather than improving the general context of development or immediate welfare. The scheme emphasized the development of a farm as a business enterprise motivated by profit. New inputs with variety of farm machinery were encouraged through pumping in large amounts of credit to the willing hands of those farmers who could utilize it for that purpose. The urge to look for a "progressive farmer who would be motivated by resource concentration and price incentive was a tacit admission by the leadership that they failed to make the small producer an effective sector of economic progress
 21
 through far-reaching institutional reforms".

It was this transformation of agricultural development strategy which led to Green Revolution - much celebrated but viewed with growing concern. It led to several consequences which are of interest to us here.

20. See Francine Frankel, "India's New Strategy for Agricultural Development", *Journal of Asian Studies* XXVIII, 4, August 1969, pp.693-710.

21. Ibid.

The fact that Green Revolution has led to wider disparities in income has been well documented.²² The already endowed farmer has reaped the advantages of new inputs. The existing steep inequalities have limited the opportunities of using modern techniques and inputs because they required financial resources to invest in assets. Obviously, the capacity of the larger farm to invest or to borrow money was much greater than the small farmer.

However, together with this, the Green Revolution brought about a large scale eviction of share-croppers and tenants and their replacements with mechanizations. The number of tractors and tubewells have gone up remarkably in the last decade.²³ Consequently, the demand for full time wage labourers, share-cropping tenants etc. has gone down. Smaller peasants who were previously able to survive by being able to lease in some additional land were now no longer able to do so. Their farm was shattered and unable to live on the little land they owned they were forced to sell what they possessed. The result has been that large scale pauperization occurred amidst rising prosperity of a few land lords.

22. See Wolf Ladjensky, "How Green is the Green Revolution", Economic & Political Weekly, December 29, 1973, B. Sen, The Green Revolution in India, Wiley-Eastern, Delhi, 1974. Francine Frankel, India's Green Revolution: Economic Gains and Political Costs OUP, Delhi, 1971; Michael Lipton, India's Agricultural Performance, Achievements, Distortions and Ideologies in Comparative Experience of Agricultural Development in Developing Countries of Asia & the Far East since World War II, Indian Society of Agricultural Economics, Bombay, '72.
23. C.H. Hanumantha Rao, Technical Change and Distribution of Gains in Indian Agriculture, MacMillans, Delhi, 1975.

On the other hand, there was also a contradictory impact²⁴ on the demand for labour. Though the amount of full time employment declined, the seasonal demand for labour multiplied with the large increase in cropped area (helped by irrigation). The rich peasants were now dependent upon casual labour during harvest time and upon those men who had no long-term obligations to the landlord. The bargaining power of the labour increased enormously because of the considerably enhanced demand for casual labour and because time factor is critical at harvest time. Much of the agrarian unrest today is characterized by such landless agricultural workers.

This recognition by the Government of the inability of developmental benefits to reach the rural poor led it to formulate specific schemes to help them out. These special programmes whether on area basis like Drought Prone Areas Programme or population basis like Small Farmers Development Agency were formulated within the broad framework of agricultural development outlined above. More precisely, these schemes were technological solutions to the problems of agricultural development. From the Fourth Plan onwards, greater emphasis has been laid on such schemes. Popular participation has been given up and bureaucratic and technological expertise is being increasingly relied upon to remedy the effects of sharp inequalities of agrarian structure.

24. See the argument in Hanza Alavi, India and the Colonial Mode of Production, Economic & Political Weekly, X, Special Number, August, 1975, pp.1235-62.

To recapitulate, one major characteristic of the rural scene that seems to have the dominant impact of all kinds of programmes for rural betterment is that of steep inequality of income and wealth among the rural people. By and large this unequal agrarian structure has persisted despite various attempts of modifying it since the First Five Year Plan. Another characteristic which is an outcome of this agrarian structure interacting with Green Revolution is the emergence of the policy to promote large farms to strengthen economic growth. The rural masses suffer from the social and economic consequences of this policy and therefore the Government devises numerous welfare schemes to soften its stresses and strains. Together with this, the government initiated several types of peasant organizations to seek help in ameliorating the conditions of the poor peasantry. As we have seen not much success has been achieved by these government initiated organizations. Let us now examine the growth and role of organizations sponsored by the peasant themselves.

VI

The All India Kisan Sabha

As pointed out earlier, the national movement for independence attempted to mobilize the peasantry and gain its support. However, to gain support, the Congress Party spearheading the movement was careful in channelling this support only to create anti-British struggle. It did not want to inject class struggle within the peasantry because in the process it would have lost the support of those who were financing the movement and who stood to gain by filling in the vacuum when the British left. Thus, the initial period of peasant mobilization sought to perceive the agrarian scene as homogenous and oppression emanating from British rule.²⁵ The jagirdars and zamindars were seen instruments perpetuating alien rule and therefore the Congress accepted that such feudal landlordism must be abolished. This was a broadly reached consensus that allowed diverse interests to work together for a common aim of evicting the British.

However, around 1936 various interests got together to form a national level organization - All India Kisan Sabha within the larger fold of the Congress. The purpose of this body was to provide a forum to peasants to free them from exploitative forces in the villages. Consistent with the approach of the Congress Party, the main emphasis was on the

25. See P.C. Joshi, Land Reform in India, Allied Publishers, Delhi, 1975.

abolition of the zamindari system. Much attention was not focused on the problem of share-croppers or landless agricultural labourers whose living conditions were the poorest in the country. Tenants under the zamindari system received special attention and the thirties saw the activities of the organization increases with growing membership.²⁶

However, soon the All-India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) and the Congress began drifting apart. The AIKS leadership was becoming more radical at the hands of socialists and communists and began passing resolutions that were not necessarily fully in tune with the official pronouncements.²⁷ The rift became wider and during the World War II the Communist Party of India, whose members were released from prison after the German attack on Russia, activated the Sabha and took over its complete control. Since then the fortunes of the AIKS have been closely linked with those of the Communist Party of India.

26. S.M. Pandey, The Emergence of Peasant Movement in India: An Area Study, Indian Journal of Industrial Relations, VII, 1, July 1971.

27. D.N. Dhangare, The Politics of Survival: Peasants Organizations and the Left Wing in India 1925-46, Sociological Bulletin, XXIV, 1 March 1975, pp.29-54.

After independence, the Congress Party's fervour for peasant organizations underwent a drastic change. Tenants who saw in the imminent departure of the zamindars opportunities to become landlords themselves, were no longer afflicted by revolutionary zeal. Other agrarian interests rushed to join the Congress to exploit opportunities of power. Consequently, the late forties saw violent peasant movement in various parts of the country but with very little participation of the Congress Party. The AIKS through the Communist Party of India was fully in command of the situation arising out of peasants revolts in West Bengal, Andhra, Kerala and some parts of Bihar and U.P. The participation by this time had widened and sharecroppers, tenants and landless agriculture workers were all involved in demanding an increase in share of crop, or lowering of rent or increase in wages. The movements were violent and full coercive machinery of the state was employed to put them down. However, they left significant impact on the peasant movement in India and the policy makers of the country.

The next ten to twelve years after these peasant movements had been put down were by and large quiet with only sporadic activity. The country was going through massive rural support programmes from a spate of land

28. See for example, Biplabdas Gupta, The Naxalite Movement, Delhi, Allied Publishers, 1974.

reform legislation to Community Development, etc. A euphoria of change was in evidence and in certain areas the membership of AIKS actually declined.²⁹ However, two events led to increased activization. One was the split of the Communist Party of India after the Chinese attack in 1962 and the other was the growing impact of the consequences of Green Revolution which began to be felt soon after 1965.

When the Communist Party of India split into CPI and CPI(Marxist), the AIKS also split down the line. Thus two Kisan Sabhas operate in India today affiliated to the two ideologically separated Communist Parties. Initially, the movement was weakened but soon the AIKS(Marxist) claimed increased membership in 1971 as against that of 1968. The peasant movement took a violent turn when the land grab movement encouraged by the AIKS(M) was taken over by an aggressive, militant and an organized group which shook West Bengal and some parts of Andhra Pradesh for a few years. This is what is popularly known as the Naxalite Movement which began in 1967 and was forcefully suppressed around 1971.³⁰ Naxalism gradually weakened the AIKS(M) and its membership declined in 1973.

29. See Bandopaddhayaya, op.cit., also Joan P. Mencher, Conflicts and Contradictions in the Green Revolution: The Case of Tamil Nadu, Economic & Political Weekly, Annual Number, February, 1974, pp.309-22.

30. For a full history see Biplabdas Gupta, op.cit.

This period also saw the birth of another national level peasant organization known as the All India Agricultural Labour Union. The AIKS had not focussed its attention on the problems of landless labourers because of its early history and association with the Congress Party. The major support base has continued to be from the middle peasantry. However, the AIKS in its meetings constantly faced the problems of reconciling the interests of the various groups in the agricultural sector. For after all the interests of tenants, small farmers, share-croppers landless labourers were not identical. They were usually different and quite often conflicted with each other. But what the AIKS attempted to do was to reconcile diverse points of view through a consensual approach. This stifled the momentum of the peasant movement and made radical postures sound hollow.

Consequently, a National Union of Agricultural Labourers was formed in 1968 in affiliation with AIKS (CPI). The Unions affiliated to AIKS (CPI-M) have not yet evolved a national federation and continue to be its affiliates at local or district levels. However, this has not resolved the dilemma. As late as 1974 the General Secretary of AIKS (CPI-M) is reported to have stated that "these vast masses of rural poor must forge for an alliance with middle peasants, supporting other demands and try to win over the rich peasants."³¹ Similar view has been expressed by the

31. Quoted in Bandhopadhyay, op.cit.

General Secretary of the other AIKS (CPI) when he said, "In essence what is needed is that the peasant movement should pay its maximum attention to the development of the peasant sector of our agrarian economy. This is imperative if the peasant movement is to grow as a movement of marginal, small and middle land owning peasantry who together with agricultural workers constitute the base of democracy in rural areas".³² The same apprehension of alienating the middle peasantry is being expressed. But the contradiction is obvious.

The result has been that the peasant movement in India is considerably weak. The two All India Kishan Sabhas and their affiliates of agricultural labour unions did not claim membership of more than 2.57 million over the entire country in 1973.³³ Including membership of other unions, the number was no more than 5% of the poor peasantry and agricultural labourers in India. This does not mean that there were no strikes or agitations. But this means that peasant movements have lacked strength primarily because National Organizations have supported movements and not spearheaded them. Also, localized protests have abounded but they have not been able

32. Quoted in Bandopaddhyay, op.cit.

33. Bandopaddhyay, op.cit.

to spark agitations elsewhere. Thus, each event is an isolated one - either the movement has been crushed or where its aims have been achieved, its organizations has melted away. Thus Government of India reporting on agrarian tensions has argued, "although the peasant organizations in most parts of the country are still organizationally weak, and their capacity for launching sustained agitations is limited, the tensions in the rural areas resulting from the widening gap between the relatively few affluent farmers and the large body of small landlords and landless agricultural labourers may increase in the coming months and years".³⁴

The rising tensions in rural areas due to the increasing rise of capitalism in Indian agriculture has on the other hand led to the growth of spontaneous but localized organizations and movements. These organizations by and large have been agitational in character and by their very nature local in content and impact.³⁵ But they do not represent the tension

34. Report on Causes and Nature of Agrarian Tension, op.cit.

35. See K.C. Alexander, The Nature and Background of Agrarian Unrest in Kuttanad, Indian Journal of Industrial Relations II, I, July 1975. Nirmal Azad, Recent Farmers Agitations in Punjab, Economic & Political Weekly X, 17, April 26, 1975, pp.702-6; Jan Breman, Mobilization of Landless Labourers: Halpatis of Gujarat, Economic & Political Weekly, IX, 12, March 23, 1974, pp.489-96; Arvind Narayan Das, Struggle of Workers and Tribal Peasants in Chotanagpur, Economic & Political Weekly, X, 9, March 1, 1975, pp.384-86; Pradhan H. Prasad, Agrarian Unrest and Economic Change in Rural Bihar - Three Case Studies, Economic & Political Weekly, X, 24, June 24, 1975, pp.931-37.

and ferment in the rural areas. However, "the situation is ripe for an explosion; in fact it has been ripe for a long time. Yet none has taken place till now."³⁶

VII

Summary and Conclusions

In solving agrarian problems, the government has continuously resorted to building peasant organizations to implement its schemes and plans. With Community Development, Panchayati Raj was introduced which gave representative organizations to the village rising to the District level. Various types of cooperatives were also encouraged in which farmers formed their own societies to help themselves out in credit or marketing facilities etc. However, the record of such organizations has been dismal. Peasant mobilization has not occurred and these organizations have served the interests of the more powerful and the more privileged. The rural poor have remained at the periphery development.

To fight for the rights of these poor, political parties have also encouraged organizations catering to their interests. Today both Communist Party of India and Communist Party of India (Marxist) have national level peasant organizations known as All-India Sabhas affiliated to them.

36. Jan Breman, op.cit. p.496

The CPI(M) has also sponsored the Khet Mazdoor Sangh an organization of the agricultural labourers. Other parties too have encouraged such organizations but they are still quite small. The total membership does not exceed 5% of the total rural peasantry including agricultural labourers. Obviously, these organizations are too weak to mobilize the peasants and to help them bargain effectively for their rights.

One of the major impediments in the growth of strength of peasant organizations has been the steep inequality in the agrarian structure itself. Land continues to be held by a small minority of agricultural households and used for further attracting investments and credit. The result is that without land or very little of it, an agriculturist is neither able to grow enough to feed himself today nor is he able to take credit to make investments for a better tomorrow. Thus, while the well endowed peasants have taken the most advantage of Green Revolution, increasing pauperization of the rest of peasantry has occurred. Growth in agriculture has led to widening of the gap between the rich and the poor. Consequently, the hold of the rich on the poor has increased. On the other hand, the poor are so poor that they barely eke out an existence. Calorie intake is very low. Physical energies cannot match the work demanded of them to survive. In such a state of semi-starvation, they cannot be expected to partake

in sustained organizational activity. When limits are reached, some agitations do occur but they do not last long. The capacity to sustain agitational activity is low. This is the reason why organizations, for example, that have striven to fight for the rights of the Santhals have combined in themselves functions that can provide economic support to their members.³⁸

Apart from this, there has been a concentrated attempt to blunt conflict and not to sharpen it. Class consciousness has not been developed and people have not been educated in terms of class interests. During the national movement this was consciously undertaken through the efforts of Mahatma Gandhi who sought to mobilize the peasantry more on anti-British than anti-feudal basis. He developed his trusteeship theory of property and pleaded for a change of heart of the landlords to help the poor. The rural classes were seen homogenous and attempt was to harmonize their interests so that they could become effective instruments of fighting the imperial power.

Gandhi's objective was to maintain unity and ensure the success of the Congress, which could only be done by holding together its discordant elements including the landlords. He said, "We must try to bring zamindars to

38. See Material Basis for Santhal Movement, Economic and Political Weekly, X, II, March 15, 1975, and also Arvind Narayan Das, op.cit.

our side"; "it is not contemplated in that at any stage of non-cooperation we would seek to deprive the zamindars of their rent. The Kisan (peasant) movement must be confined to the improvement of status of Kisans and betterment of relations between zamindars and them".³⁹

The Sarvodaya Movement of Acharya Vinobha Bhave and Jai Prakash Narain is a legacy of this throughout. The Congress dominated peasant organizations have clearly taken the path of consensus and reconciliation. In the case of Halpatis of South Gujarat, the mobilization of labourers is non-antagonistic in nature. The Gandhian principles of arbitration, compromise and avoidance of open clashes between the parties form the basis of their policy.⁴⁰

The result has been that sharp policy aims for organization have not emerged. Organization that are formed to fight for rights and to agitate for them have to develop strength from clear goals which are really ideological in nature. Unless such clarity and sharpness emerge, organizations tend to be loose and amorphous.

39. Quoted in Govind S. Kelhar, -Kisan Unrest and the Congress in Uttar Pradesh, 1920-22, Economic and Political Weekly, X, 52, December 27, 1975, pp.1987-94.

40. See the Agitations of Halpatis of Gujarat, Jan Breman, op.cit.

This is precisely what happened. The Government sponsored organizations catered to all kinds of peasants living within particular area. Thus, a Panchayat consisted of the landless agricultural labourers as well as landlords living in the Panchayat area. A Co-operative Society similarly was based on heterogeneous groups. The All India Kisan Sabhas themselves have been dominated by middle class farmers but have included other categories of peasants too. It was not until 1968 that a separate organization for agricultural labourers was born. As we have pointed out earlier, the General Secretaries of both the Communist Parties of India urged cooperation among the various groups for making peasant movement successful in India. Recently in Punjab, where new organizations have come up their membership has tended to be similar to that of the Kisan Sabhas. A new organization (The Wahikara Union) is trying to organize in some regions of the state both the marginal and the small farmers. However, it is interesting that at the present moment this union is controlled by the interests of middle class farmers. Thus in its slogans and demonstrations it displays more the militancy of the rural middle classes ⁴¹ not different very much from the existing kisan Sabhas.

On the other hand, peasant groups themselves do not often present unity of interests. As a matter of fact,

⁴¹. Nirmal Azad, op.cit.

sometimes landless labour itself does not signify a homogenous category. To illustrate, in a given year a particular family might be holding land as a tenant. At that time they might temporarily be employees of landless labourers themselves. In another year, they might not be given land to cultivate on a sharecropping basis. This yearly rotation which started as fears of tenancy legislation mounted has also served to keep the landless competing with one another for sharecropping rights.⁴² Thus, organizations tend to be based on consensus and heterogeneous membership. Conflicts are diluted and broad goals are delineated. Specific interests of the rural poor not being fulfilled means meagre mass support and lack of enthusiasm among them for organizational activity.

Another weakness in the peasant organizations in India can be traced to the general approach adopted to solve rural problems.⁴³ Government policies and programmes have relied heavily on the effectiveness of the administrative system to bring about changes in the rural sector. Even those programmes which depended upon people's support for their success have been so designed that they cannot succeed unless administrative support and effort is also available.

42. Joan Mencher, op.cit.

43. See Kuldeep Mathur, Administrative Institutions, Political Capacity and India's Strategy for Rural Development, ACDA, Kula Lumpur, 1975. (Mimeo)

In fact, the Five Year Plans are replete with statements which emphasize the close inter-dependence of public and administrative action.

A major consequence of this approach has been that peasant organizations have been looked at as supportive agencies in any programme of rural development. The administrators perceive them as agencies helping them to fulfil ⁴⁴ aims of public policy. If they fail in this perception, then these organizations tend to represent for the administrators the ignorance of the rural masses which calls for more effective administrative rather than popular action.

Cooperatives in India stand testimony to this kind of ⁴⁵ administrative strategy. Even in searching for alternatives the weaknesses sought to be remedied are in terms of technical and administrative apparatus. It is frequently forgotten that the fundamental problem is that of the socio-economic milieu in which the cooperatives are created and function and grow. Members have to be homogenous in background and interests.

The decision to create new kind of commercial banks known as rural banks is another example of administrative strategy at work. One set of institutions, and organizations are created to help the rural poor and when it is found that

44. See Kuldeep Mathur and M. Bhattacharya, Administrative Response to Emergency, Concept, Delhi, 1975, for a fuller discussion of these perceptions.

45. See Kuldeep Mathur, op.cit.

they tend to help only the rural rich than administrative schemes are devised to help the rural poor and improve their condition. The Small Farmers Development Agencies and Marginal Farmers and Agricultural Labourers Agencies were set up in certain number of districts in the hope that they would do what the elective peasant organizations could not do. Rural banks have been set up to do what cooperatives have failed to achieve. The result is that genuine support is not given to sustain representative peasant organizations.

Such an approach emerges from the primary orientation of the administration itself. From the British days, the administrators have led themselves to believe that they are the only custodians of public interest. A paternalistic administrative orientation has developed which has usually discouraged the growth of other organizations which make demands as a matter of right and not out of favour.

The second dominant orientation is that of law and order. District administration's primary duty is to maintain peace and stability and any activity that disturbs its tranquility earns its wrath. Peasant organizations have to mobilize the poor and fight for their rights. Such aims will undoubtedly attempt to alter the existing production relations and therefore will be resisted by those who are powerful and are their beneficiaries. Consequently,

disturbance of peace is bound to follow. Law will go out to suppress those elements that have encouraged disturbance. These will be the peasant organizations. The basic nature of the law flowing out of the power structure of the state becomes status quo oriented and oppressive towards those demand change. Thus, even when a particular administrator may support change he faces unsurmountable difficulties from both his political as well as administrative bosses.⁴⁶

In conclusion, some weaknesses that we have tried to sum up are germane to the organizations themselves while others flow out of the socio-economic and political environment. The question of strengthening the peasant organization really poses a dilemma. Changes in the environment or in the organizational working cannot occur unless the peasants themselves are able to show strength and fight for their rights. This cannot happen unless the environment changes and favourable conditions are created for peasant organizations to flourish.

46. See the story, Naxalites in IAS clothing, Economic and Political Weekly, VIII, 44, November 5, 1973, pp.1937-38.

The real issue is political and is concerned with total development perspective. The social basis of power has to undergo a drastic change to support genuine demands of peasantry. However, history shows that peasantry as a political force can develop only when political power independent of landed interests emerges and strikes at the root of landed interests. Till then, adjustments among elites take place and certain policies are implemented that tend to soften the stresses and strains of the peasantry.

TABLE I

ANNEXURE I

45.

SIZE DISTRIBUTION OF HOLDINGS - RURAL SECTOR

Size Groups (In Hectares)	1954 - 55		1961 - 62		1971 - 72	
	No. of Holdings	Operated Area	No. of Holdings	Operated Area	No. of Holdings	Operated Area
1. Less than 1.0	50.7	5.6	39.1	6.9	45.3	9.3
2. 1.0 - 2.0	16.9	10.0	22.6	12.3	22.7	14.9
3. 2.0 - 4.0	15.9	18.6	19.8	20.7	17.8	22.6
4. 4.0 - 10.0	11.6	29.2	14.0	31.2	11.2	30.4
5. 10.0 and above	4.7	36.6	4.5	28.9	3.1	22.8
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

SOURCE

H. Laxminarayan & SS Tyagi: Some Aspects of Size Distribution of Agricultural Holdings, "Economic & Political Weekly", XI, 41, October 9, 1976, p.1639.

+ Figures are in % rounded to the first decimal point and are based on the 8th, 17th and 26th rounds of National Sample Survey.

ANNEXURE II

TABLE II
AVERAGE SIZE OF HOLDINGS
(In Hectares)

	<u>1954-55</u>	<u>1961-62</u>	<u>1971-72</u>
Less than 1.00	0.3	0.5	0.5
1.0 - 2.0	1.5	1.4	1.5
2.0 - 4.0	2.8	2.7	2.8
4.0 -10.0	6.2	5.8	6.0
10.0 and above	19.0	16.8	16.4
	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>
TOTAL:	2.5	2.6	2.2
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